

**UCDAVIS  
HEALTH**

**MIND  
INSTITUTE**

## Mental Health Issues in Autism Across the Lifespan

Presentation to  
2019 *Summit*



**Marjorie Solomon,  
PhD.**

**Professor of Psychiatry**

**Oates Endowed Chair in  
Lifespan Development**



# Mental Health Challenges in Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- Many children, adolescents, and adults with ASD face mental health challenges (~70%; Leyfer et al. 2006; Simonoff et al., 2008)
- Common co-existing problems include:
  - Attention dysregulation (ADHD)
  - Conduct or Oppositional Defiant Disorder/behavior problems
  - Anxiety
  - Mood/Depression
  - Psychotic disorders



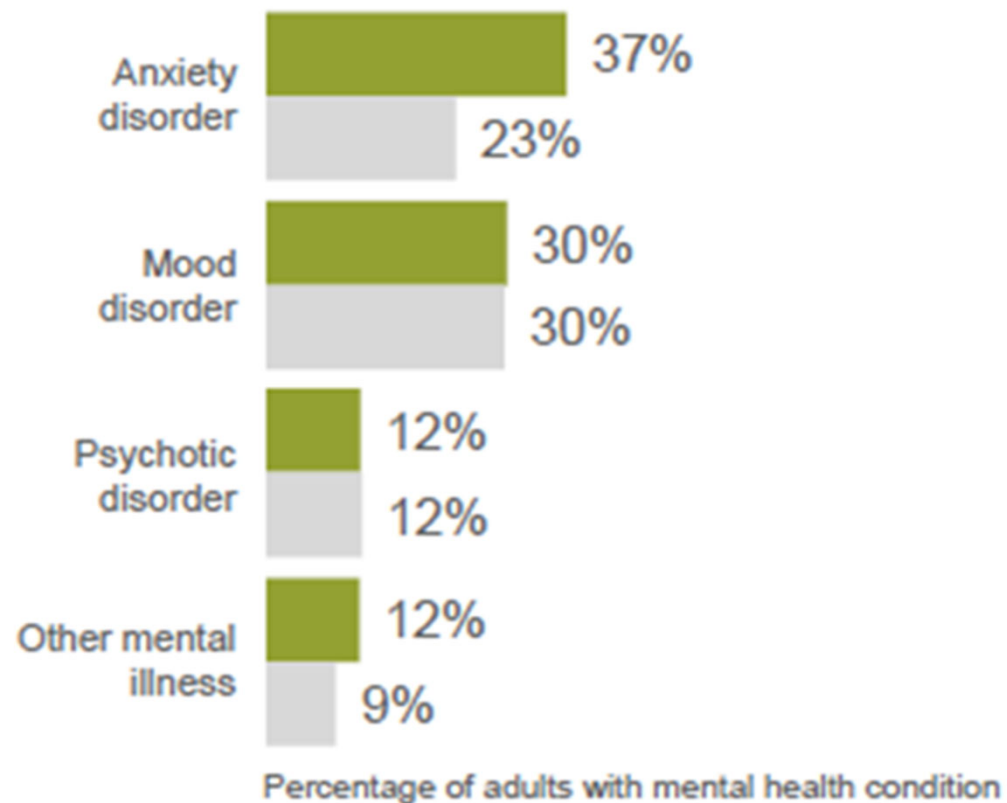
## How Common Are These Mental Health Problems in Persons with ASD compared to TYP?

- **Attentional Issues** (21-30%)
- **Conduct/behavioral Problems--** (~25%)
- **Anxiety** (40%)
- **Depression** (30% in children and adolescents; 77% of outpatient adults have been depressed)
- **Psychotic disorders** (8-18%)
- **Diagnosis can be difficult due to similar symptoms, “diagnostic overshadowing,” differing presentation in those with intellectual disability (ID), use of various measures across multiple informants**

From: Rosen, Mazefsky, Vasa, & Lerner, 2018

# How Common Are These Problems in Adults with ASD vs. Adults with other Disabilities?

## Mental health conditions in adults with ASD versus other DD service users.

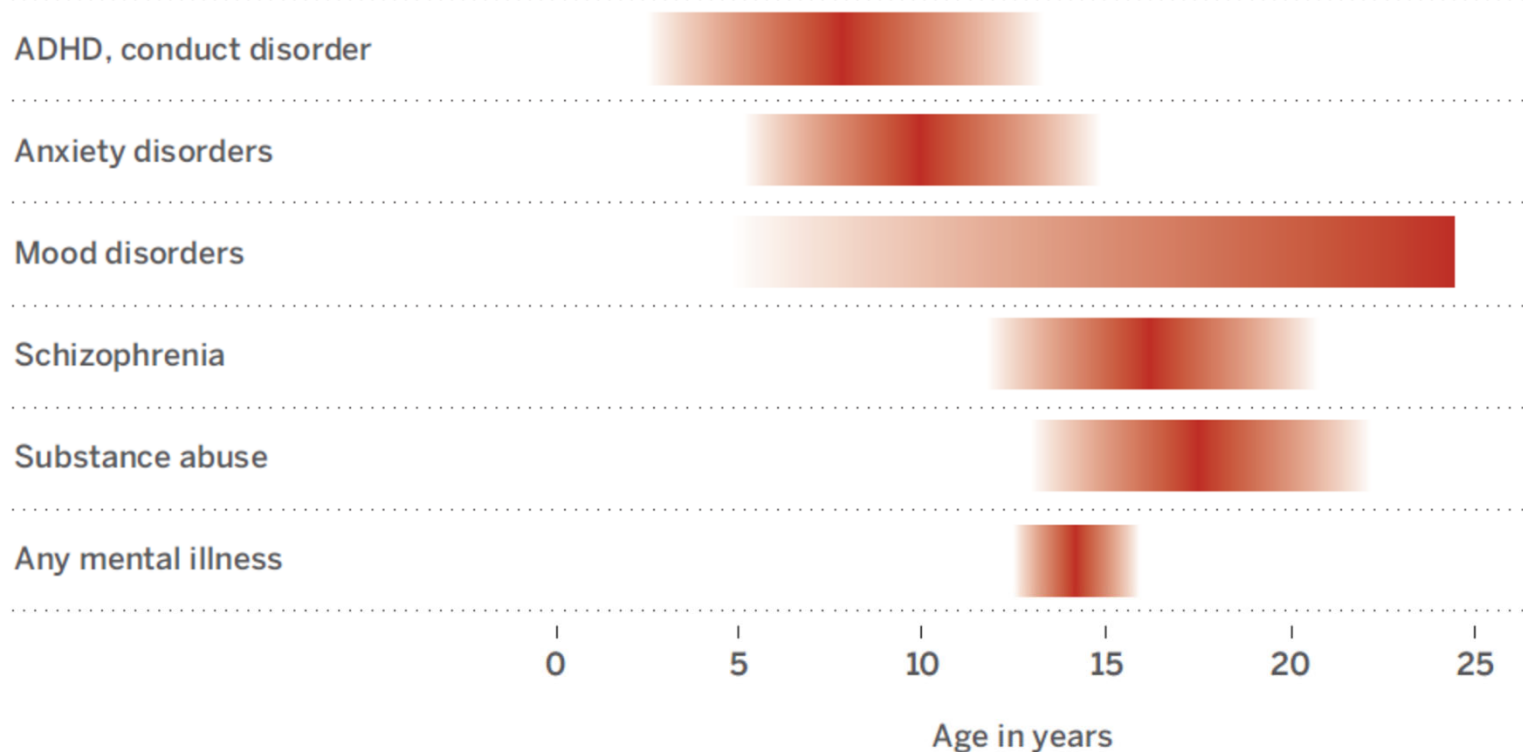


Source: NCI Adult Consumer Survey 2014-15

# When do these Mental Health Problems Emerge?

## Emergence and peak in mental disorders during adolescence

One in five adolescents have a mental illness that will persist into adulthood



*By* **Francis S. Lee,<sup>1</sup> Hakon Heimer,<sup>2,3</sup> Jay N. Giedd,<sup>4</sup> Edward S Lein,<sup>5</sup> Nenad Šestan,<sup>6</sup> Daniel R. Weinberger,<sup>7,8</sup> B. J. Casey<sup>1\*</sup>**

As in TYP, incidence declines with age (Lever & Geurts, 2016)



# Symptoms of Attention Issues (ADHD) in ASD

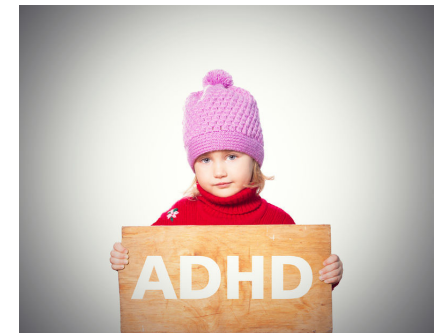
**Hyperactivity:** Fidgets, squirms, leaves seat, on the go as if driven by a motor, talks too much, blurts out answers, difficulty waiting, interrupts or intrudes on others

Can have one or both type of sx  
Inattention more common in ASD. Symptoms present before age 12 and clearly impairing

In children with ID, hyperactivity more common. In those with higher IQ, it's inattention

**Inattention:** Carelessness, inattention to detail, poor listening, poor follow through and listening skills, easily distracted forgetful, loses things

ADHD sx make functioning in other areas worse



## Symptoms of Conduct/ODD/Behavioral Problems in ASD

Angry irritable mood, argumentative or defiant behavior, vindictiveness. Often occur at home, but can be present across multiple settings. Can be very disruptive to functioning.

ODD more common in those with verbal skills needed for arguing, higher intellectual functioning, and boys.

Very important to consider the meaning of the symptoms in the context of ASD. Those affected may lack skills to understand the impact of their behaviors.



# Symptoms of Anxiety in ASD



Anxiety = excessive fear and worry  
There are many ways to be anxious...

- Social anxiety
- Specific phobia
- Generalized anxiety disorder
- Separation anxiety disorder

It can be hard to differentiate anxiety and ASD symptoms

- Atypical social fear
- Fears of change
- Fears related to special interests
- Odd content of phobias
- Emotion dysregulation

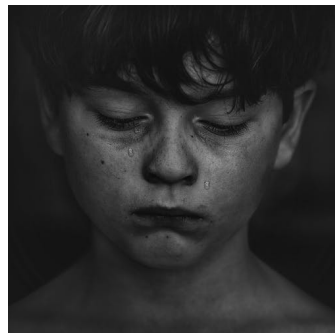


Intellectual ability level can affect the detection and presentation of anxiety symptoms



# Symptoms of Depression in ASD

Feelings of sadness, hopelessness, worthlessness, loss of interest/fulfillment/motivation and energy for activities once enjoyed, loss of ability to concentrate that occur very frequently and impair functioning and may not have a trigger.



- In children (especially) irritability may be a sign
- Beware of suicidality
- More common in girls, women, adolescents
- Can result in greater time spent in circumscribed interests or regression in skills
- More common in those with higher IQs and social awareness

# Symptoms of Psychosis in ASD

**Positive Symptoms:** hallucinations (auditory, visual, olfactory, gustatory, tactile), delusions (persecutory, referential, somatic, erotomanic, religious, grandiose), confused thought or speech, odd movements.

**Negative Symptoms:** lack of pleasure, trouble speaking, flattening, withdrawal, struggling with life skills.

- History of lumping and splitting ASD and schizophrenia
- Cognition problems are most impairing
- Schizophrenia not the only disorder involving psychosis
- Usually onsets in late teen years with women later
- Psychosis in ASD or ASD in psychosis?
- The Prodrome or Clinical High Risk State



## How Do Mental Health Professionals Help?

Condition	Empirically Based Treatments
ADHD	Medications, parent training, attention training (Cogmed Working Memory Training)
Behavior Problems	Medications, parent training, child training, Parent Child Interaction Training (PCIT)
Anxiety	Medications, cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), mindfulness-based approaches, <b>STAAR Trial</b>
Depression	Medications, CBT for rumination, mindfulness-based approaches,
Psychosis	Medications, CBT, multi-family groups, educational/vocational supports